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The Agricultural College Editor

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THE AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE EDITOR ^{1/}

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Bulletins and newspapers have been prominently recognized for many years as means of supplying agricultural information. Only recently, however, have administrators realized that the preparation of information for popular use requires the services of a trained specialist - a specialist not only with a facility for explaining scientific facts in plain, readable, accurate language, but with breadth of view, an aptitude for organization, and a keen and accurate understanding of human nature. In the earlier days all too many thousands of printed pages that were for the most part unintelligible to the man whom they were designed to influence were scattered over the countryside. Experiment station and college publications too often failed to present the results of research in clear, concise, practical terms. Scientists, although preeminent in their particular fields of research, were seldom expert publicists. What was needed was a person who could rescue the practical facts from obscuring and unfamiliar scientific terminology and impart them to farmers in language to which they were accustomed. The editor, as a connecting link between the man who knows and the man who wishes to know, supplied this need.

In the beginning the agricultural college editor was a part of the administrative activities of the college and experiment station. His duties consisted primarily of editing bulletins and reports for grammatical expression and punctuation. The alert, efficient editor soon discovered the necessity for establishing cordial contacts with the investigators in subject-matter departments. This was sometimes quite difficult, for research workers frequently regarded as an intrusion the attempts of editors to make their manuscripts interesting and useful. They could not understand that a discussion which to them was clear and precise might not be in suitable shape for popular consumption.

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I still recall the vigorous protest which came to me when, as editor of the Journal of the American Society of Agronomy, I eliminated Latin, French, and German phrases from a brief manuscript on some minor experiment. The proud author claimed I had destroyed all his individuality, but I felt then, and still feel, that I did a good job. On the other hand the editor may go too far in his attempt to reform all expression into his own mold. A case in point was my own editing of the first bulletin manuscript of one of our young workers, who, after reading the revised draft of his brain child for a couple of hours, let out a loud yell. On inquiry by one of his fellows as to the cause, he said gleefully, "I've found a 'the' where I put it."

That editors generally handled their editorial functions with patience and tact without sacrificing their standards is evidenced by the happy and mutually constructive relationships now existing. In fact, the aid of the editor is now sought by an increasing number of research and extension workers in the preparation of their material for publication. Only the other day a letter came to the department from an editor who commented on the insistence of specialists that he rewrite their manuscripts in proper form. This editor regrets that an insufficient staff prevents his giving the help which he desires to give and to which the research worker is entitled.

In recent years the volume of information has grown so rapidly, especially in economic fields, the demand for it has developed so remarkably, and the channels through which it may be disseminated have increased so amazingly that many institutions are poorly equipped to meet the situation. Is it that the agricultural colleges require a larger editorial personnel, a more efficiently organized and centralized editorial office, or a more systematic planning of informational effort? Perhaps an improvement in each of these three vital factors would materially better the situation in most institutions.

Let us consider for a moment the situation confronting the informational forces today. Agriculture has forged its way to the forefront of American political and economic life. The solution of rural problems is no longer being considered solely by farmers and by educators in agricultural colleges. The farm situation has become national in aspect. Agriculture belongs to the city as well as to the country. The farmer's problems and aspirations are intimately interwoven in the fabric of the Nation's welfare. Frank and free discussions of the prevailing agricultural issues are essential.

The country in recent years has been repeatedly confronted with emergency conditions needing immediate remedy. The invasion of the boll weevil and the Mediterranean fruit fly in the South and of the corn borer and the Japanese beetle in the North, the sharp decline in wheat prices, floods, the widespread drought through which we are passing at present - all these are examples of suddenly arising menaces that may change agricultural conditions and prospects and cause much distress among farmers within a few weeks or even over night. The prompt and widespread release of complete information covering such situations plays an extremely important part in the Nation's relief efforts.

It is no longer difficult to place agricultural material in the newspaper, for the press wants it; public interest demands it. Problems of the farm are now considered news and regularly achieve the distinction of front-page headlines in the metropolitan newspapers. They are repeatedly discussed in the editorial columns.

In addition to the increased use of informational material by the press, farmers are asking for more bulletins. Both these factors add to the amount of material that passes through the editor's hands. But press releases and bulletins are only the foundation stones of the editor's bridge between his institution and the public. Lantern slides, film strips, photographs, maps, graphs, cartoons, posters, charts, motion pictures, radio, all have their part in the structure. Even yet the editor's task is not done, for he must prepare and distribute extension house organs, teach county extension agents and project leaders how to write news, and aid these agents in taking more and better pictures.

Not only is there a great increase in the demand for information and in the number of channels through which it may be disseminated, but the sources from which it may be obtained have been enlarged. In 10 years the total number of extension workers has increased from 4,630 to 5,942. There are 400 more extension specialists now than there were 10 years ago and college research staffs have increased proportionately. In 1920 the funds expended in the States for cooperative extension work amounted to \$14,658,000, while in 1930 \$23,804,000 were expended; an increase of more than \$9,000,000. The increase in extension personnel and funds has made available a vast amount of material that the editor feels he must utilize to the best advantage of the farmer and farm woman.

With the steady growth in the demand for information and in the scope of informational activities, the editor is finding his field greatly enlarged and he must accept the challenge. Of course the final responsibility for all phases of extension endeavor rests with the State

extension director. He must develop the working staff and must align his forces to accomplish the best results. Although the increase in editorial personnel has been fairly consistent in some States, too often it has not kept pace with the rapid development in other fields. Just now we are concentrating on the economic phases of agriculture. The creation of the Federal Farm Board and the efforts of the Department of Agriculture and the State agricultural colleges to cooperate in carrying out the Farm Board's program are opening an entirely new field for informational material. The extension director must consider whether such additions to the extension program call for corresponding increases in the editorial staff.

In measuring the influence that various methods exert on the adoption of practices, we find that informational material rates very high. In computing the cost of the several methods we learn that this material is comparatively cheap. Perhaps a greater use of informational material would bring about a much larger volume of results with a comparatively small increase in expenditures. Most State agricultural colleges are utilizing only a small percentage of their vast informational resources. Increase of editorial personnel as rapidly as conditions permit may be helpful in strengthening the programs of these institutions.

While I am discussing the factor of increased editorial personnel, I should like also to point out that within the last two years the State extension services have employed 300 additional county home demonstration workers and 30 new home-economics specialists. Our plans for organizing extension activities for farm women are still far from complete and we may expect further increases in the number of women agents from year to year. There is need for disseminating more information on home economics subjects in order to arouse greater interest in better home making among farm women. Here is a place for the employment of women assistant editors. While women can and do prepare material covering all lines of subject matter, they are particularly apt in dealing with home-economics facts. The home economics program demands adequate handling.

Many administrative officers overlook the fact that the editor's job offers opportunity for showing initiative and original thought concerning desirable and efficient methods of reaching and influencing people. His direct contacts with State and county extension staffs, with newspaper editors, and with farm people and the constant study that he devotes to adapting his media to the needs of farm men and women have given him a wealth of experience and a mental perspective

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invaluable in educational work. He has an opportunity to survey the whole field of extension from a relatively unbiased vantage point. Far too few States have recognized and employed to their advantage the breadth of view of the experienced agricultural college editor. Editors play an important part in the extension system. It would be a distinct asset to have them more actively associated in extension councils, in the formulation of extension programs, and in the determination of extension policies. Only in this way can they keep their fingers on the pulse of extension progress and thus more readily and accurately interpret the extension message.

There is a noticeable trend toward coordinating all editorial and informational activities in the college under the same general supervision. Such centralization seems to be logical. In fact experience indicates that this type of organization should be carefully considered in any plan for improving editorial conditions. A centralized editorial office, properly organized, offers several obvious advantages. It enables the editor to keep in more intimate touch with the activities of the entire institution and gives him a better comprehension of the multitude of facts needing distribution. It avoids duplication of effort. It permits the editor to concentrate the efforts of his office on the release of material covering emergencies or on certain important phases that are being emphasized by the college, thus focusing the attention of farmers on practices which it would be desirable for them to adopt. A complete information program which adapts the practical facts to the needs of the State can be more readily developed. Wider and more efficient distribution of information with a proportionately smaller expenditure of funds and time can be accomplished by a unified editorial office.

Of course it is realized that a central information office must give satisfactory service equally to the extension service, the experiment station, and the college. This can not be done unless adequate personnel is provided. The head of the editorial division must make his needs known to the president of the institution, the extension director, the experiment station director, and the dean of the college, so that he may not be criticized for giving one branch more service than another. Where institutions have not found it desirable to centralize their informational activities it is usually because conditions have not been favorable to the setting up of a properly balanced organization which adequately meets the needs of all branches of the institution, rather than because the plan itself is not practical.

Although the extension director is responsible for the size of his working staff and the results obtained, the systematic organization of the informational field, the development of editorial technique, and the maintenance of suitable standards rest largely with the editor. There are ways in which the editor can make his work better understood, appreciated, and supported. The organization of systematic plans of work would, I am sure, help to bring about better recognition on the part of administrators. Napoleon maintained that a plan is necessary for everything and that whatever is not carefully considered in detail produces little worthy result. When he lapsed from his custom of following a prearranged plan and permitted events to be influenced by chance, he lost his first battle and his crown.

There is such a thing as becoming too engrossed in the details of the immediate job. It is easy to overlook the advantage of having a well-balanced and well-coordinated information program with definite objectives carefully worked out in advance in cooperation with supervisors and extension specialists. The forces at the editor's disposal are enormous and the influence that he can wield is tremendous. The farseeing agricultural college editor today recognizes that he can utilize these forces most advantageously by developing a good informational program and carrying it through to a successful conclusion.

He sees the need for an exhaustive survey of sources of material, a thoughtful study of the various channels for the dissemination of information, and a careful analysis of the objectives. He builds from these a practical program of operation that results in greater and more systematic coordination of effort and more efficient and widespread influence. He finds it profitable to visualize annually a program for progress and growth during the year, predicated upon the previous years' experience and upon the knowledge he has obtained from conferences with administrative officers, supervisors, and specialists concerning their plans and objectives. Once each month he reviews the progress made in carrying out this program, in determining what features to emphasize during the following month, and in making readjustments. A program thus prepared and followed through places the editor's efforts on a firm foundation, with definite results in mind and a positive plan of action for attaining these results.

It is this type of editor, capable of wise planning and of successful execution, that commends himself to the administration of his institution, his associates in educational effort, and to the general public that is served. It is to men of this type that we must look for still higher appreciation of the editorial office and the strengthening of the editorial organization and its functions in every State.



